BREATH OF LIFE
John 20:19-23
May 29, 1983

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If you have been privileged to be present when either the first or the last breath of a person's life was taken, you have known what it means to stand in the presence of the sacred. The moment of birth, and the moment of death have been universally regarded as holy. Yale theologian Peter Hawkins suggests that even in this enlightened era "there are no atheists at spectacular sunsets or at the birth of one's own child." Primitive people could make the rudimentary observation that to be alive meant to breathe; whereas to be dead was to cease breathing. It was a logical conclusion that breath itself was somehow mysteriously full of life, mysteriously holy. "Breath is the livingness of those who are alive" is the way one writer puts it.

So it is that popular folklore has been entranced with the mystery of breath. The rapid exhalation during a lusty sneeze, it was thought, totally depleted the life of the person. The essence of the aliveness, the spirit, as it were, had departed and the individual was vulnerable either to an invasion of evil spirits, or the non-resumption of breath. In any event, it was an appropriate occasion for anyone nearby to offer a hasty prayer in the form of "God bless you."

The mystery of breath is in our story too, from the beginning. And on occasion it has taken interesting forms. Ancient church custom called for the priest to breathe on the infant being baptized. And sometimes the expressions were nearly bizarre - "ordination by insufflation" for instance. New Testament scholar Raymond Brown tells about the ancient Egyptian Christian custom of "filling a skin bag with the holy breath of the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria, tying it up and transporting it up the river to Ethiopa where it was let loose on the one designated to be the head of the Ethiopian church." (The Gospel of John, Vol. II, p. 1023)

There is a fascinating theological insight in the combination of ancient folklore and church tradition: a very old and surprisingly helpful way to think about God and God's relationship to us. The church ordinarily calls it the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and across the years has designated this day, a week after Pentecost, Trinity Sunday, as a time to think about it. Holy Spirit, however, seems rather ambiguous to many Christians apparently. Fred Buechner suggests that if you repeat any English word twenty consescutive times, "umbrella" for instance, it will cease being a word, lose all its meaning, and become a nonsensical noise. That is what has happened to the big words of the faith: repeated over and over by generations of the faithful, they have ceased to have much content. "Holy Spirit" primarily he suggests, and I agree, is one of those seriously depleted and devalued words. Hans Kung concludes that the spirit is, for many, "theologically, absolsutely unintelligible." My proposal this morning is that we try to understand that Holy Spirit is a way the church has found it convenient to talk about God, and that a working definition of Holy Spirit just might be "breath of life." That, it seems to me, is suggested by the text this morning, the resurrection appearance of Jesus to his disciples on the evening of the first day of the week.

In the fourth Gospel Jesus calls God spirit. One time, talking to a woman he met at the well he said: "God is a spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." At the last supper, in a lengthy monologue known as the Farewell Discourses he promised the disciples that they would not be alone after he is gone: the spirit will be given to them. And then, after the resurrection, this fascinating and powerful incident: Jesus appearing in their midst, showing his hands and side, breathing on them and saying "receive the Holy Spirit."

There is a sense in which this dynamic is what is happening in the text for the day. The setting is the Temple in Jerusalem, at the feast of Dedication which celebrated the liberating and cleansing of the Temple by Judas Maccabeus two centuries earlier. We know the feast by the name Hannukah. It was December. Jesus was walking in the covered portico inside the Temple wall when he was approached by a group of people who said: "How long must you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah say so plainly." It was probably an attempt to trap him: to trick him into a statement which later could be used as evidence of the crime of blasphemy. In fact, that is what happens in the next paragraph. At the very least it was an ill-advised effort to persuade Jesus to simplify a question which was very complex. Clearly, he and they differed regarding the definition of Messiah. If he had said, simply, "I am the Messiah" he would have spent the rest of the afternoon defining what the word did and did not mean.

Now this text is often used as a launching pad for homilies on the necessity for being simple, straightforward, and understandable in our articulation of the faith. It is a good point and the sermons are good. Unfortunately it is not consistent with what happens next. Jesus, in fact, doesn't tell them plainly. What he says is, "I have told you but you do not believe." What he had told them was that he was the good shepherd, and while the shepherd figure is loaded with Messianic content, it is not synonymous with Messiah. Instead of simplifying the issue in the way they wanted, he pointed off in a different direction: "My deeds done in my father's name are my credentials" is the way the New English Bible translates it.

The point is the deed, the act, the behavioral communication. The point, I take it, is that there are some things in this life which cannot be pinned down in simple, one-word answers; some things which are only affirmed, defined and expressed in action. Unless you are marvelously poetic, you cannot put into words your love for a dear one. I love the vignette about the ballerina who was asked what she was trying to say in a particlar dance. "If I could say it, I wouldn't have to dance," she replied.

It is wrong, and dangerous sometimes, to oversimplify and miss the complexity. I was in a discussion recently in which it was maintained that any young person in this country who can't read doesn't want to read. That's an oversimplification. That misses the complex reality of Daryl, 12, whose mother works, whose father is gone, whose only positive reinforcement - only good feelings about himself - come when his buddies cheer him on for knocking out the parking lot lights at Broad Street Church. It's an oversimplification to say Daryl doesn't want to read...and our refusal to deal with his complexity may make us feel good and principalled and righteous - and we will have Daryl on our hands for the next sixty years. It may be emotionally satisfying to see every liberation movement in Central America, or the world, every effort to establish justice, every organization dedicated to the improvement of life for the poor, as part of a Soviet conspiracy...But it is wrong and tragic. Nothing is ever gained by oversimplifying that which is complex.

"For the real amazement, if you want to be amazed, is the process. You start out as a single cell derived from the coupling of a sperm and an egg, this divides into two, then four, then eight, and so on, and at a certain stage there emerges a single cell which will have as all its progeny the human brain. The mere existence of that cell should be one of the great astonishments of the earth. People ought to be walking around all day, all through their waking hours, calling to each other in endless wonderment, talking of nothing except that cell. It is an unbelieveable thing, and yet there it is, popping neatly into its place amid the jumbled cells of every one of the several billion human embryos around the planet, just as if it were the easiest thing in the world to do."

"No one has the ghost of an idea how this works, and nothing else in life can ever be so puzzling. If anyone does succeed in explaining it, within my lifetime, I will charter a skywriting airplane, maybe a whole fleet of them, and send them aloft to write one great exclamation point after another, around the whole sky, until all my money runs out."

Our incipient suspicion of creation has made us uncomfortable with the arts, in recent centuries, at least. One of the things the Vatican Art Exhibit is saying to the world is that Christianity used to understand that the creative force within humanity is divine: that this incredible impulse in us, to stop what we are doing and pick up a piece of burned wood and scratch a picture of an ox and a tree and a child on a cave wall; this magnificent impulse to arrange sounds in a relationship and meter which ends up a Brandenburg Concerto; this absolutely stunning impulse to get in on creation by adding to it, rejoicing in it, even laughing at it - is of itself the divine; the breath of God which is the breath of life in us.

The second implication has to do with who we are. The question is an old one. "What is man that thou art mindful of him?", the Psalmist asked, posing the eternal riddle of our humanity. Anthropologists, Paleontologists, Zoologists, our favorite Internists for that matter, will tell us that the human body is marvelous but not altogether unique. The source of pleasure, pain, vanity, and a lot of anxiety to be sure, but limited, in many ways, compared to the rest of the created order. There are living things which are larger, stronger and much faster. If we are unique it is on some basis other than our bodies. Old Testament scholar Phyllis Tribble tells her students that Genesis 2 is a blunt reminder that the Bible does not present humankind as superman, but rather lowly earth creatures, made of the dust, made significant by the divine breath, spirit, life, in us.

That is, of course, both good news and bad news. The bad news is that there are plenty of reasons for human humility, or at least keeping things in proper perspective. The bad news is that we have been incredibly arrogant about the rest of creation, simply eliminating whole species which were not useful to us. The good news is our potential dignity, our position in the created order, divinely appointed, divinely inspired, a result of the spirit, the breath of God, the life in us.

Third, and this too is a gift from Martin Marty, to act Christianly is to carry the signs of hope, always. We are in the season of Resurrection. We live in the refracted light of an event so large it, above all events, defies simple description. Death did not defeat Jesus Christ. The powers of death were no match for Christ. Fundamental issues are now resolved. We are safe and free and the whole world is full of possibility because of the resurrection. We are the people, someone said, who sing at funerals. We are the people who will never give up on the world, who will be found working for improvement against all the odds, laboring when everyone else has gone to the party. To act as a Christian is to be constantly a sign of hope. Those without hope, the cynics, the ones who have given up on the world, feel no compulsion to work at much of anything except their own amusement. Ghandi was wrong, someone told me recently. "Those people over there will always be poor, dependent and violent and the sooner we forget the romantic nonsense about freedom and nonviolence the better." I prefer Martin Luther on the subject of hope. He said, "If they told me the world would end tomorrow, I would still plant a cherry tree."

Christian hope is not starry-eyed naivete. In fact, it confronts the simple truth that at this moment in history, things are not going well for our side. Freedom and justice and peace are not, at this moment, on the rise. Quite to the contrary. Christian hope doesn't oversimplify and doesn't overstate its own success potential. It stays, firmly, in the struggle - because it has its roots in Jesus Christ, who was dead but is risen.

How to act as a Christian? Somewhere before the strategy is devised there is a basic matter to be confronted. At some point in our pilgrimage we have to decide that it is important to us - perhaps the most important thing for us to take care of. At some point we have to see that our salvation, our wholeness, our integrity as a person depends on how we answer that question.

Walter Wink, an innovative New Testament scholar, was asked recently about his own faith pilgrimage. He said something important in response. "For the first forty years or so the burning question is, 'What is the meaning of my life?' We struggle with it and against, we read, pray and agonize over it. And then in the middle years the burning question changes. Instead of 'What does my life mean?' - it becomes - 'How, with the time remaining, can I make a difference?'"

I suppose we never totally lose the expectation that someday we will know, intellectually, all we need to know about life, death, God: and when we have that down, then we will know what to do about it. I have a hunch that we will wait a very long time; and that our wait will end when we either sell out to someone's simplified version of the Gospel, or simply give up on the whole enterprise.

There is another option, however. Jesus said, "The deeds I do in my father's name are my credentials." Your faith and mine; the faith of the individuals we have ordained and installed to office this morning, is authenticated as it takes shape in deeds: acts of moral intensity, of civility and tolerance for all our brothers and sisters: individual and corporate acts of tenacious, unrelenting hope for the world.